

# Creating New Animated TV Series for Girls Aged 6-12 in Britain

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This article focuses on the development and marketing of animated female lead characters on television for an audience of girls aged 6-12 in Britain. Using strategic marketing theory it asks the questions: “What do girls want (to see on screen)?” “How do they get it?” and “How do we (the animation industry) sell it?” The paper reviews 87 starring female lead characters worldwide and finds that most are: 2D in design, feature characters with American accents, have a cast of either group or independent characters and are of either a ‘dramatic’ or ‘dramatic/comedic’ genre. The article concludes that the types of television shows girls are watching could be improved to better meet their needs. It encourages content creators to be brave and test new ideas and offers practical tips to executives, producers and commissioners on development and positioning of new animated television series that will engage their audiences.

## Personal Preface

As an animation producer, academic, and campaigner for indie animation and women’s rights I decided in 2013 that I wanted to answer the question: Why aren’t there more animated female characters on British children’s TV? That year also happened to be the year I launched Animated Women UK – since then a lot has changed!

The 1980s was a great time for empowered animated female leads in TV series as merchandisers recognised audience buying power (Perea, 2014). This didn’t translate to the big screen as from 1995 to 2012 most of Pixar’s films featured male leads. It was not until 2011 that a woman solo directed an animated film (Gardam, 2013).

This trend changed in the mid-2010s with the onset of self-sufficient princesses leading Disney’s features. These new films passed the “Bechdel Test” (Bechdel, 2013) and the first animated feature with a non-princess female lead, *Inside Out* (2015), was released.

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Women's groups internationally have united to raise awareness, educating the public and industry about how deep rooted sexism in children's animation is. American organisations such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media have created campaigns like *See Jane* ([www.seejane.org](http://www.seejane.org)). Other groups like Women in Animation (America, Ireland, Italy), Animated Women UK, Les femmes s'animent (France), Women Drawn Together (Toronto/Vancouver, Canada) and Women and Animation Australia (aka WANDAA) exist to facilitate change their territories.

Has anything really changed? In 2015 the British Film Institute and Women in Film & TV (UK) hosted Geena Davis in London. An audience question was: Why do I not see any animated female lead characters on (British) children's television? The answer is simple: the BFI does not fund development of original animated British TV series; British broadcasters provide investment to few original animated series, so for British producers it is difficult to create female characters. Instead Britain relies on acquisition of foreign content, which typically contain less female leads (Davis, 2015).

I believe that girls aged 6-9 are still being discriminated against. Despite representing the majority share of the market in publishing, social gaming, and feature films, they are being denied access to one of the most artistic, innovative forms of art and expression – animation.

Why is this important? Well, if an animated TV series is created specifically for boys it encourages development of their ego by inadvertently saying "We care about you; we want you, (not girls) to have fun!". By only providing girls aged 6-9 with live-action young adult content, the adult community sends a silent message that we expect girls to behave in a more grown-up way; they are not entitled to have fun or be silly like boys are.

It is extremely important that content creators realise the effect they have on children in this way. I want to challenge executives and commissioners who argue that "girls don't buy enough toys to make creating an animated series commercial viable" to continue reading; do your homework, be brave – let those assumptions go! Girls can make you money *and* be entertained watching an animated series.

I want to provide girls with awesome and amazing characters they relate to; that make them feel good about themselves, highlighting their importance to society. I want to send girls the message that they are welcome into the world of animation, rather than cast aside.

## Introduction

Animated content for girls is an under-served market (Hughes, 2014). Some believe the girls' market is difficult to access due to competition from traditionally boy-skewed licensing and merchandising models and girls' movement towards live-action at an earlier age (Davis 2013, Wood 2014). Alternatively, there has been a global movement of brands increasing their share of the female market, as films with strong female characters make twice as much profit as those without (Vocativ, 2013).

This trend towards developing appropriate content for women and girls continues (Mintel, 2014; Silverstein 2009), with Disney's *Frozen* (2013) having touched the hearts and minds of a newly formed global audience (Law, 2014). Little public information is published about what animated TV series girls aged 6-12 actually want to watch.

So, what does an animation producer need to consider when launching a new animated TV series for girls aged 6-12? I used Proctor's (2014) segmentation, targeting, and positioning technique to begin to answer this question.

## Strategic marketing

### *What do girls want? (Market segmentation)*

Proctor suggests dividing what appears most important to my audience into measurable segments. After reviewing a number of surveys, academic studies, and compilations of girls' views themselves, a number of themes became identifiable as being highly important to this segment: power, expression, confidence, acceptance, empowerment, communication, and uniqueness were all significant for girls aged 6-12.

Topics of interest to girls included: bullying, puberty, relationships, and 'real-life' issues. They also appeared to have specific lifestyle interests in: nature shows, math, science, reading, making money, and 'being artistic'. In terms of how girls play, it is important that they relate to the characters they see on the screen (Wieners, 2011). 'Princess play' is strongly marketed at girls, but further research is required to identify alternatives to this option (Cook & Main, 2008).

CEO of PlayScience Alison Bryant says: "Girls are looking for properties that show them respect and take them seriously (while not being too serious – in fact, humor is key!). They don't want to be pigeon-holed – they love gender neutral, smart programs with strong leads." (A. Bryant, personal communication, 18 October, 2016)

### *How do they get it? (Market targeting)*

Most girls aged 6-12 access animated series through the family television, mobile device, or through parents' purchases. Broadcast channels provide most of this content, which is either acquired or developed in-house.

Disney and Mattel are some of the world's biggest providers of animated TV content for girls (Lisanti, 2015). Many major European content producers have announced they are seeking to create new animated TV brands for girls (Wood, 2014). Cartoon Network and Teletoon claim to be 'girl inclusive' (Kidscreen, 2013).

The UK market operates through nationalised and private networks, with public service broadcasters aiming to appeal to all, but the girls' 6+ animation market is sorely under-served by national channels, as American networks capitalize on the opportunity. For example, specialist girl-skewing freeview channel POP (owned by CBS/Lionsgate)

features nine TV shows with animated female leads ([www.popfun.co.uk](http://www.popfun.co.uk)); SVOD Disney Channel has two ([www.disneychannel.disney.co.uk/shows](http://www.disneychannel.disney.co.uk/shows)). They are both ahead of CITV, Sky Kids and national broadcaster CBBC, all of which according to their websites currently have no shows featuring animated female leads (mixed gender casts were not counted). In the UK 81 animated TV series for 6+ feature male leads, compared to just 87 shows with female leads internationally. In May 2016 CBBC and BBC Worldwide joined to commission development of *Mystery Soup* an animated comedy featuring three 13-year-old female leads (BBC, 2016).

Girls can also access content via other paid or free VOD platforms; it was found that many girls obtain content through libraries, illegal download websites, social media and friends.

Specialist websites like *A Mighty Girl* offer procured content with female leads ([www.amightygirl.com](http://www.amightygirl.com)).

### *How do we sell it? (Market positioning)*

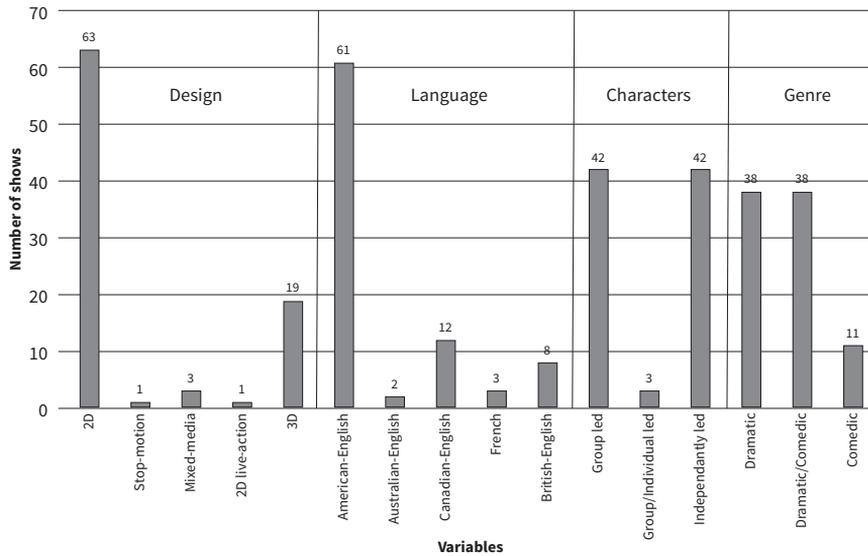
The last part of this marking process is to position a new show against those already produced. It was difficult to find evidence of girls wanting to see more animated TV brands other than personal testimonials on YouTube and news accounts (Mintel, 2014; The Huffington Post, 2013).

Since 2013 there has been a lot of coverage of what adult women feel girls should be watching; they should have access to articulate, visible, relatable female animated leads (as I have seen reported through my Animated Women UK Facebook feed), but there recommendations are only anecdotal until the girls themselves are better represented. Unfortunately, some sexist male TV executives don't want them watching animation at all (Pantozzi, 2013).

In order to get a fuller picture of what animated series already exist for this market I completed a comprehensive review of the 87 animated TV shows featuring female lead characters I could currently find on air. The list is not conclusive; it does not cover all shows globally; instead it provides a snapshot of the type of content available. I compiled Google searches, IMDB, and YouTube along with broadcast websites to create it. Free TV was focused on English-speaking territories. I divided shows into four main variables: design, language, characters, and genre.

What I found was that they were animated using mostly 2D design. Regarding language (accent) American-English was dominant. The genres were split between dramatic or dramatic-comedy, with a few comedy extras. The female lead characters were either a group (e.g., *Monster High*, *My Little Pony*) or individual-led (e.g., *Dora and Friends*). Having two female leads (e.g., a buddy comedy – a common format featuring male leads) was unheard of. Mixed gender casts appeared to be created more recently, and I've noticed that the 'girl and a thing/animal' genre is very popular in pre-school (e.g., *Sarah & Duck*, 2013).

**Figure 1.** List of animated TV series featuring female lead characters for girls Age 6-12 worldwide (English)



As part of Proctor's process I also considered complimentary markets, such as publishing, mobile phones, fashion, advertising, and music. If I were to take into consideration campaigns in the toy market specifically, such as the *Let Toys Be Toys*, or the YouTube *Girls* advertisement by GoldieBlox (Tasha, 2014) it would appear that while a selection of animated TV shows exist featuring female lead characters, a new show would want to appeal to the empowerment of girls; to get involved in things they are interested in, rather than promoting negative stereotypes of girls simply being interested in princess play or gossip.

Creating a new product comes with higher financial risks compared to investing in an evergreen brand or reinventing a classic. To combat these problems, Hooley suggests supporting innovation by staying close to customers, keeping internal communication open; being aware of what resources are available to solve the problem (2012).

So, knowing what the market and its audience want, how does a producer approach a studio, artists, or writers to create a new animated TV show for girls aged 6-12?

## Creative development

Below I outline what information currently exists that I could identify specifically relating to animated TV series with female leads.

## Visual design

What is important to girls aged 6-12 about what their female lead animated characters look like? Götz & Lemish provide an invaluable resource including a review of series from 24 countries and letters from children to producers (2012). More specifically, girls prefer watching shows featuring characters with ‘normal’ (i.e., average human) waistlines (Götz, 2008). According to the BFI, the design and animation should incorporate natural human movement (Ipsos Mori, 2001). According to an independent study done by BuzzFeed on Disney female lead characters: most are under aged 20, Caucasian, with both or one parents deceased, are born royal, have blue eyes, wear dresses, and are employed as princesses (Zwiebel, 2014); more diversity here could be key.

Visual references are becoming easier to come by; when I first searched for “girls’ animation” on Google it returned pornographic material. Then I searched for “animated girls’ TV show”, which brought up mildly better results. Finally “character design for girls” brought up the best results. Overall it was difficult to find characters that represented the diverse human population, realistic body shapes (including head, eyes, waist etc.), or those wearing much clothing. According to Chapman the sexist opinions of marketers and executives have trickled down through directors and designers to limit the female form (Gardham, 2015).

I decided to search for educational examples instead where you could learn how to draw a female character from scratch. Sadly, I was overwhelmed by hypersexualised examples. Many blogs and men’s magazines featured “hot” and “sexy” lists of animated female characters; some under age (Murphy, 2015; Wilding, 2012). One design instructor says: “If you can design a pretty girl you’ll never go hungry” (Bancroft, 2016). His comments were not unique; a ‘Top 40 character’s design tips’ article featuring mostly male designers included the advice “...everybody will like a sexy, fun girl, but most will be offended by too much sexuality. Think sexy, not sex.” (Creative Bloq, 2013).

A few non-sexualised examples were discovered, including: Wikihow<sup>1</sup>, Jon Burgerman<sup>2</sup>, and Smashing Magazine<sup>3</sup>.

Viguet’s guide on “how to draw realistic Disney princesses”<sup>4</sup> provided practical tips. Female facial design comparison article<sup>5</sup> also helped.

The search term “design a cartoon characters for girls” brought up additional examples:

- The *Cartoon Characters – Anger Woman – Graphics Collection*<sup>6</sup> was inspiring
- The social network Pinterest had a plethora of body types, facial designs, styles and genres; I have started a *Female Character Design* page to keep track of the ones I like ([www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com))
- Some of the least sexualised designs came from the publishing industry; graphic novels and games have a growing number of female-led properties suitable for this age group

- Animation studios and production companies have many shows in development, but most are not public knowledge
- There are plenty of designers and illustrators creating wonderful concept characters (see end note for examples)<sup>7</sup>

## Writing (concept, character, dialogue)

### *Concept*

Wood (2014) reveals what TV executives believe girls aged 6-12 value in the creation of top-quality animated content;

- Hasbro – Relevant, upbeat, positive, funny, feisty, kickass characters with great writing and story
- Studio 100 – Captivating, modern, cool, social shows containing friendship, mystery, romance, adventure, communication, and interaction
- M4E – Adventure, excitement, comedy, emotion, heart, authenticity, good story and clear design
- Cake Entertainment – Well rounded, charismatic and compelling characters with a positive outlook with social interactions based in the real world
- Mondo – Copy how girls live their lives

Additionally, Mattel claim that Barbie “...will continue to help girls discover that anything is possible”, Monster High encourages girls to “Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster.” and Ever After High targets the “trendista” and “...inspires girls to be courageous, confident” (Mattel, p. T9, 2015). Ironic, as Barbie was originally designed as a sex doll for Nazi German soldiers to prevent the spread of STD’s during WWII (Mail Online, 2011).

Linda Palmer from Runaway Productions thinks girls want to see “...emotion (make me feel something), reassurance (make me trust you) and authenticity (show me you mean it)” (Chahal, 2014). According to Faust (2010), “Cartoons for girls don’t have to be a puddle of smooshy, cutesy-wootsy, goody-two-shoeness. Girls like stories with real conflict; girls are smart enough to understand complex plots; girls aren’t as easily frightened as everyone seems to think. Girls are complex human beings, and they can be brave, strong, kind and independent—but they can also be uncertain, awkward, silly, arrogant or stubborn. They shouldn’t have to succumb to pressure to be perfect.”

While it is clear what marketers think is appropriate for girls, academics also have views; role models for girls are key figures currently overlooked in this market (Kraemer, 2000). Others want to create opportunities for girls to enjoy engaging in as much play as boys (Jensen, Fisher & de Castel, 2011).

### *Character*

When constructing female characters consider a variety of archetypes. Ellis (2015) identifies nine specific to girls including The Amazon, The Father's Daughter, The Nurturer and The Spunky Kid. Female archetypes are further detailed by Estes (2008) who focuses on the 'wild woman' and categorised within animation by Davis as 'good girls and wicked witches' (2007).

Award-winning scriptwriter Murrell (personal communication, 20 April, 2016) counters unconscious bias at development stage with an approach she calls 'dress testing'; "I get offered a lot of shows where the creatives have made key characters male without even knowing they're doing it," she says. "Dress-testing makes those choices explicit. It questions every role: not just their gender, but their appearance, behavior, and beliefs too. This isn't just box ticking; it enriches characterisation, broadens audience appeal, and improves the show's chance of commercial success."

When all else fails there's always printed art books featuring female artists (Bove, 2014) or the Female Character Flowchart<sup>8</sup>.

### *Dialogue*

Fought & Eisenhauer (2016) analysed all the dialogue from the Disney princess franchise, finding that in modern princess films the female leads often spoke less than 50% of the time, even in the case of *Frozen* (2013), where the two leads are female! It is important we see more female-to-female dialogue as well as seeing characters who are relatable and funny. Geek Dads cites a list of *12 Comics for a 7-Year-Old Girl*, with its own built-in Bechdel test (<http://geekdad.com/2015/02/12-comics-7-year-old-girl/>).

## Conclusions and suggestions

So, what does the animation industry need to consider when launching a new animated TV series for girls aged 6-12? Here are my suggestions:

- Be specific about your target market; classifying all girls with the same wants, needs and behaviors may alienate some of them (Hooley, 2012)
- Challenge stereotypes; "...girls prefer brands that...don't necessarily match up to stereotypes that currently exist in marketing" (Chahal, 2015, p.1)
- Seek out new archetypes
- Employ and publically promote teams of high caliber, vocal female leaders
- Commission public research to give girls a voice; ask them what they would like to see
- Utilize the references below

Girls have a lot to say, so it is about time we listened to them; incorporate their updated values, stories, and designs into commercial animated series.

In conclusion, the girls 6-12 animation market needs to be redefined and better provided for. Let us shift the dialogue from ‘what girls *should* watch’ to what they actually *want* to watch; combine experts’ views to develop their ideas in ways that will benefit them. For example, executives can be more aware of gender bias in their construction of the female animated form to create less sexualised imagery of both boys and girls; merchandise can be more creatively imagined to appeal less to out-dated sexist stereotypes (Lemish, 2013). For those seeking inspiration, Lemish’s “Eight Working Principles for Change” provides a “conceptual framework for producing better gender portrayals on television for children around the world”; a check list that for time-pressed executives has the potential to produce easily achievable results (p.124, 2010). As children’s gender stereotypes are already ingrained at a young age it will become the responsibility of the adults to create content encouraging a positive self-image, even if girls themselves are not yet sure what this might be (Bates, 2015).

It is time to be brave, let go of your preconceptions and start testing new ideas! As the girls of the future begin creating their own content, the biggest risk is not engaging; TV companies will miss out. It is time to start innovating new solutions particular to girls’ content in animated series.

## Notes

1. [www.wikihow.com/Create-Your-Own-Cartoon-Character](http://www.wikihow.com/Create-Your-Own-Cartoon-Character)
2. [www.creativebloq.com/character-design/tips-5132643](http://www.creativebloq.com/character-design/tips-5132643)
3. [www.smashingmagazine.com/2008/08/10-awesome-contemporary-character-designs/](http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2008/08/10-awesome-contemporary-character-designs/)
4. [www.nydailynews.com/life-style/unrealistic-anatomies-disney-princesses-revealed-article-1.1365387](http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/unrealistic-anatomies-disney-princesses-revealed-article-1.1365387)
5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/inside-out/disney-pixar-characters-same-face/>
6. <http://www.myfreephotoshop.com/cartoon-characters-anger-woman-graphics-collection.html>
7. See e.g. [www.shannonassociates.com/artist/melissamanwill?url=18310](http://www.shannonassociates.com/artist/melissamanwill?url=18310), <http://crikeyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2010/07/sunshine-umbrella-girl.html>, [www.annacattish.com](http://www.annacattish.com), and [www.shannonassociates.com/kidshannon/artists/erwinmadrid](http://www.shannonassociates.com/kidshannon/artists/erwinmadrid).
8. <https://www.overthinkingit.com/2010/10/11/female-character-flowchart/>

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